

RISHMA DUNLOP

Reading Amy Lowell

Summer and I have returned to the town where
I was a young wife
where we raised our daughters.
The name of the place means *a place to live forever*.
Mythology and daily life. Legends of sea serpents,
ghosts of horses lost swimming in from the island, tangled with
slow-pitch tournaments, ballplayers and Winnebago campers,
tourists on the beaches and lunching at wineries.

Today I am marking freshman English papers in the backyard.
The air is sweet and fugitive. In the garden, wild strew of roses,
pink blooms amidst the silver foliage of planted pathways
fragrance spilling from their thorn beds,
the morning stillness stung by the
screeching of Steller's jays and flocks of crows
singing a crude chorale.

In the distance, the sound of ducks landing on the swimming pool,
splashing and flapping their wings.
My daughters laugh and I am struck by that particular radiance
again and again how the laughter of girls
cuts through blue air.

How did I come to this place,
the professor circling sentence fragments,
the occasional leap of the heart when a student writes a beautiful phrase.
My student has written an essay on Amy Lowell.
And suddenly I am transported, back to 1972 at Beaconsfield High
in Mr. Whitman's North American Literature class, yes
that was his name.

Fifteen years old, sitting in those straight-backed wooden chairs,
my legs cramped under the tiny desk with my huge Norton anthology
open at Amy Lowell's "Patterns."
There have been so many words I have committed to heart.
This poem was one of them.
I could taste poetry, feel the rhythms of it beating in my eyelids.
For the first time, reading Amy Lowell,
I understood that burnt cadence of sense,
the quickstep of syllables in my throat.

I wrote an essay on Amy Lowell's "Patterns,"
something about the Imagist movement, the poet's use of figurative
language and form
in a consideration of how societal expectations
may inhibit a woman's actions in society.

Mr. Whitman gave me an A on my essay.

I promptly forgot what I knew about patterns
in the wisdom of my sixteenth year.

I must have known then, something about the effect of patterns,
knowing Lowell's narrator, the feel of her corset, her pink and silver
brocade gown, how she grieves for her dead lover
 how a heavy-booted lover would have loosened
 the stays of her stiff correct brocade
in the pink and silver garden,
 the bruise and swoon of it.

*I too am a rare
Pattern.*

In dreams I see the husband of my girlhood,
his arms around me like a familiar blanket,
my pink and silver time,

He is holding something out to me, places it in my palm
a scroll, a tablet, some lost history inscribed
unreadable.

And centuries pass and we are still *gorgeously arrayed*
trousseaus of pink and silver,
mouths stuffed with bone china
pink and silver, boned and stayed.

Christ! What are patterns for?

At sixteen I used to mouth the words
swords springing from the repetitions
from the ribs of consonants.

Today, I reread the poem and the body flies apart,

remembering how a grown woman can brush back her hair in moonlight,
watch her husband and daughters inside her house as if in a dream.

Remembering days when the woman wakes up and she understands her skin
doesn't fit her anymore.

What she does inside that skin leaves
her outside her house in long nights of crickets
singing and the lake whispering.

Sometimes, she longs to be like characters in a novel or a poem,
the relief of flatness on paper.

The heart is literate.
It wants to read the pages it has unfurled.
It wants the grip of roses on love-ridden afternoons,

the ordinary TV, chair, table, plate, sneakers
entangled through a sky of blood tracery swept innocent by rain.

I want conversation that is like the stripped truth of the poem,
the way I felt when I first read Amy Lowell's "Patterns."
Over the years I wondered what kind of shelter
I could make with words.
I search for the color of home in the extravagance of reading.
I am looking for it still.

This town is not a place for introspection. Such beauty.
The lake, the blue air, the sun, all defy me
to find some fault in this horizon.

Over the years I weaned my babies, got ready to walk
into the pink and silver light.